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UNCLAS MUSCAT 000761

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KWMN MU

SUBJECT: OMAN RATIFIES WOMEN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION

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Summary  
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1. (SBU) A royal decree May 7 ratified Oman's joining the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, although reportedly with some reservations. The step came on the eve of Oman's participation in the May 7-10 NAM Ministerial on the Advancement of Women taking place in Malaysia. The Ministry of Social Development anticipates that a national committee will be formed to start bringing Omani laws and regulations into compliance with the Convention. In her address to the NAM Ministerial, Oman's Social Development Minister reviewed the progress made in enhancing women's role in the Sultanate's public and private sectors. End summary.

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Changes Expected  
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2. (U) The Omani government announced May 7 that Sultan Qaboos issued a royal decree ratifying Oman's joining the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Perhaps not coincidentally, the decree was announced on the eve of Minister of Social Development Dr. Sharifa al-Yahyai's participation at the Non-Aligned Movement's (NAM) May 7-10 Ministerial on the Advancement of Women, which took place in Malaysia.

3. (SBU) The Ministry of Social Development (MOSD) Director for External Affairs, Shamsa al-Harthy (protect), told us May 11 that Oman's ratification contains four reservations, primarily pertaining to aspects of the CEDAW that might run contrary to Islamic principles. The details will not be known until the Convention is published in the official gazette. She cited bureaucratic delays, rather than philosophical opposition, for Oman's late ratification of CEDAW. Al-Harthy also noted that a national committee will be formed to identify changes in existing Omani law that will need to be made to be in accordance with CEDAW, and that a report will be issued annually to assess that progress. In light of the fact that CEDAW in certain areas goes beyond the protections afforded in Oman's Basic Law, she predicts "there will definitely be some changes." Entrance requirements to the state-run Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is a specific area al-Harthy expects to be addressed. (Comment: This subject is already a hot topic of debate, since the lower admission standards for males in certain academic fields at SQU are in place to prevent the female majority from growing even greater. End comment.)

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Achievements to Date  
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4. (U) In her May 10 address to the NAM Ministerial, Dr. Sharifa extolled Oman's trailblazing efforts among the Arab Gulf states to promote female equality, and hailed the important step of ratifying CEDAW. (Note: Dr. Sharifa will head the Omani delegation attending the opening of the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival on the Washington Mall in late June, in which Oman will be featured. End note.) As one of four minister-ranked women in the Omani government, she cited several statistics on women's achievements in Oman since Sultan Qaboos ascended the throne in 1970:

- they constitute 12 percent of senior state officials;
- they now occupy 31 percent of public sector and 19 percent of private sector jobs;
- they constitute 50 percent of undergraduates and 55 percent of students in diploma programs; and
- women now hold 12 percent of the seats in the appointed upper house of parliament (up from 10 percent in 1997), and 2 of the 82 seats in the elected lower house.

BALTIMORE